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ABSTRACT

The problems which emerge in a critical assessment of social perception research reflect limitations at both the theoretical and implementational levels. Traditionally, social perception research has focused on conscious, cognitive, and linguistic processes in studying the perception of psychological qualities of people. Such a focus leaves unresolved the issue of the adequacy of observable manifestations in providing information about their sources. Information obtained by social perceivers must be addressed at a physical (static and dynamic properties) and a phenomenal (behavior and actions) level. Traditional research has assumed that observed stimulation is not structured sufficiently to convey information for the perception of internal states and attributes. Under this assumption, investigative priority has been placed on the hypothetical mechanisms of social perception while neglecting the empirical issue of the information potential of social stimulation. Recent research proposes a shift from investigating internal processes to investigating the information potential of social stimulation. This is done through discovering the dynamics in stimulation, combining temporal order with spatial order, and discovering the action perception in patterns of movement. This more phenomenal approach recognizes the individual as an efficient and effective perceiver and re-establishes the focus of social perception research as discovering the relationship between man and his environment. (BL)

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Conceptions of Social Stimulation and Their Effect on
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Conceptions of Social Stimulation and Their Effect on Social Perception Processes

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This paper traces the forms and deficiencies of current approaches to social perception to traditional assumptions about the nature of social stimulation. Particular attention is given to the impact of assuming that social stimulation is insufficiently structured to provide the perceiver with much information specifying social percepts. Under this assumption, the traditional approach has placed investigative priority on the hypothetical mechanisms of social perception while neglecting the empirical issue of the information potential of social stimulation. The hazards inherent in such an approach serve to organize and make understandable the criticisms of process and research emerging in the social perception literature.

Over the last four decades, social psychologists have focused considerable attention on the processes of social perception and have proposed numerous models to account for individuals' impressions of many features of their social environment. The various models proposed have generated an enormous quantity of research and have greatly enhanced our understanding of social behavior. Recent critical analyses, however, have raised a number of issues ranging from the adequacy and necessity of currently proposed processes to the representativeness of experimental contexts in social perception research. The problems which emerge from such critical assessment are a direct reflection of fundamental limitations, both at the level of theory and research, in our thinking about the social perception process. In the present paper, we will attempt to promote a conceptual understanding of the forms and deficiencies of current approaches to social perception in terms of traditional assumptions regarding the nature of social stimulation.

Traditional Considerations in Social Perception

"Perception," as the term applies to social perception, is recognized to have a metaphoric status in social psychological literature (cf., Jones & Gerard, 1967; Jones & Thibaut, 1958; Knowles & Smith, 1982; Newtonson, 1976; Tagiuri, 1969). At least since Heider's (1944) assessment of social perception as apperception, the consistent empirical approach toward social perceptual processes has been set within a study of factors which are conscious, highly cognitive, and usually linguistic in nature. This approach is often justified in general discussions by considering the objects of social perception and their contrasts with those of physical perception.

Although the term social perception can refer to the perception of a broad range of social phenomena, it has been used traditionally to refer to the perception of people, in particular the perception of psychological qualities of people such as intentions, traits, abilities, emotions, attitudes, and purposes. Unlike other objects, these "objects" are states or events which are internal to the individual. In an interesting exception to this approach, Jones and Nisbett (1971) proposed that personal dispositions are evaluations, or value qualities, more "in the eye of the beholder." In either case, the objects of social perception are considered unseen and, for the most part, unseeable. This notion is fundamentally related to the proposition that social perception is a cognitive or an inferential process. The argument in its most rudimentary form is this: Since we cannot "see" purported internal states of individuals which effect their behavior, the existence of such states must be inferred from observable manifestations which serve as cues or clues to possible sources within the individual.

Naturally, this is an oversimplification of the contrast between physical and social objects of perception which, in itself, does not justify high-level cognitive intervention. The position that personal dispositions are totally subjective ignores the environmental properties which serve as referents to such percepts. Averill (1973), for example, argues in passing that dispositional variables are high-order relational variables. Such variables summarize "law-like relationships" among events of interest. Likewise, the distinction that social percepts must be inferred from observable manifestations which serve as cues or clues to dispositional sources is superficial. Space perception, for example, involves objects and events yet it is not the perception of an object or an event. Rather, it involves high-order relational properties between objects and events which remain stable over a variety of

conditions (Haber & Hershenson, 1973). The mere physical presence of objects or the occurrence of events do not provide an adequate account of their perception. Regardless of the object of perception, the perceiver must still rely on information obtained from environmental properties. The information for form perception, for example, is not the physical presence of form per se, but rather its observable manifestations, i.e., marked contrasts in intensity or hue.

Unlike many introductory discussions in social perception, the actual issue is not so much of a contrast between the focal objects of the two bodies of literature as it is a shared problem unresolved since the inception of the perception literature in psychology and recognized early by Heider (1958, 1959) in social perception. This fundamental issue involves the adequacy of observable manifestations to provide information about their sources to perception. The term information, as used in this context, should not be confused with its use in information processing literature where it indicates a reduction in uncertainty, i.e., a clue. Much like Gibson's (1966) use of the term, the degree to which observable manifestations make available information about states and attributes is reflected in the degree to which they are specific to states and attributes and to their perception. That is, certain configurations which are specific to dispositional variables can be said to provide adequate information for the perception of those variables.

The issue of the information obtained by the social perceiver can be approached at various levels of description. At a physical level, one is concerned with static properties of individuals and dynamic properties of movement. Static properties of individuals include bulk, skin texture, color of hair, color of clothing, and so forth. Dynamic properties of movement include rhythm, direction, and velocity. Most social perception theory and research

operate at a more phenomenal level of description, e.g., behavior or actions as opposed to movement. At either level, internal states and dispositions do not appear to be mediated to social perception by specific stimulus complexes (Hastorf, Schneider, & Polefka, 1970; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Tagiuri, 1969). Rather than being specifically related to internal events or to their perception, social stimulation is considered as only probabilistically (Brunswik, 1956) related. Direct perception of intent through the observation of the actions taken, for example, is not thought to occur because a particular intention is not specific to a particular course of action. As Heider (1958) notes, particular actions can usually reflect a number of possible internal states, thereby providing ambiguous mediation. Further, particular internal states may be reflected by a number of actions which would then be said to provide synonymous mediation.

Whether explicit in early statements of the issue or implicit in the meta-theory of contemporary models, the general conclusion is clear. Observed stimulation, including that obtained from behavior at any level of description, is not structured sufficiently to convey much information for the perception of internal states and attributes, the traditional concern of social perception. Perceptual "information," at best, is conceived as fragmentary cues or clues. Recently, however, alternative conceptions of the information potential of social stimulation have been proposed by a few investigators (e.g., Baron, 1980; Knowles & Smith, 1982; Shotter, 1974; Shotter & Newson, 1980). For example, Shotter suggests that people show their psychological states in the temporal organization of their behavior. With regard to intentions, the temporal sequencing of the spatial possibilities reveals the person's choice and thus manifests his or her intention. In contrast to the position summarized above, he considers behavior as highly structured in a fashion which is specific to

psychological states and, therefore, very informative about those states.

Ideally, selection between these two contrasting conceptions is an empirical problem. Consider, as the present models are constructed, the perceptual process to be in three pieces: stimulation, processing, and percept. Unfortunately, stimulation is generally assigned the a priori role of an insufficient input in social perception theory and research and attention is directed toward the elucidation and investigation of internal processes leading to social percepts. As a result, the traditional conclusion regarding the information potential of social stimulation is more of a reasonable opinion than the product of careful investigation. To this point, we are left in the unenviable position of having considerable speculation about how processing could occur and very little knowledge concerning what is available to be processed. The traditional approach of proposing process in the absence of an adequate empirical description of stimulation is inherently problematic. Indeed, we would argue that the latter logically precedes the proposal of mechanisms in the order of priority. To the extent that present accounts of the social perception process ignore the information potential of social stimulation, they are not only incomplete, they have, so to speak, placed the cart in front of the horse.

Impact on Theory and Research

Using the sharply contrasting assumptions about the information potential of social stimulation above it is possible to illustrate how the nature of our conceptions of social stimulation fundamentally influences the nature of our account of the social perception process. If the information available to, and detected by, the perceiver is considered grossly inadequate to account for perception, the investigator's attention is drawn to processes within the head of the perceiver whereby he structures stimulation and constructs a

meaningful percept from inadequate information. This is the approach traditionally taken in the social perception literature.

The process whereby order and meaning are imposed upon incoming stimulation in social perception appears to have two phases. First, the perceiver, via some linguistic coding system (Hastorf, Schneider, & Polefka, 1970), analyzes into components the events observed in social episodes (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Hamilton, 1979; Shaver, 1975). Investigators who speculate on the mechanisms of the categorization process suggest that it involves prototypical schema and a matching process (e.g., Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Massad, Hubbard, & Newton, 1979; Wyer & Srull, 1980). In the second phase, the abstract components derived from this analytical process are encoded into some constructive process where they are evaluated and combined to form a meaningful percept.

In impression formation, for example, the observer employs person classification schemes, or trait labels, which are encoded into an additive (Triandis & Fishbein, 1963) or an averaging (Anderson, 1962, 1968) process or into a process whereby they are otherwise compared with each other (Asch, 1946) and with other stored information (Bruner, Shapiro, & Tagiuri, 1958; Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954; Wegner & Vallacher, 1977), all of which results in a unified percept. In attribution theory, social events are analyzed into causal components such as ability, effort, task difficulty, luck (Heider, 1958), mood, fatigue (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979), effects which are common or noncommon to behavioral alternatives of the actor, and effects which are socially desirable or undesirable (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976). The various components are combined using an ordinary form of logic (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979) or some more sophisticated system of logic such as a quasi-analysis of variance process in which

the presence or absence of possible effects are assessed for covariation with the presence or absence of possible causes (e.g., Kelley, 1967). The constructive process results in attributing a social event or outcome to a possible personal or situational cause. Such attributional processes have also been adopted to account for social perception on the intraindividual level, especially the individual's perception of the causes of his or her own behavior (Bem, 1967, 1972) and the perception of his or her own emotional states (Nisbett & Valins, 1971; Schachter, 1964).

On the other hand, the alternative conceptions of the information potential of social stimulation lead to a much different approach to social perception. If the information available to, and detected by, the perceiver is considered adequate to account for perception, the investigator's attention is drawn to the structure of the perceiver's social and non-social environment and to his attentional processes. This presumably will be the tactic used as a body of systematic theory and research unfolds based upon recent alternative conceptions. Although the specifics of this newer approach are yet to be delineated, it has one obvious advantage. It focuses empirical attention on the input into the social perception process.

By treating the nature of stimulation as a foregone conclusion, the traditional approach precludes the necessary role of stimulation in model construction. An adequate description of stimulation acts as a safeguard against the proposal of inappropriate mechanisms. The efficient selection among the various forms of plausible processing is limited by the extent to which the percept is specified in the stimulation obtained by the perceiver. The problem with proposing process prior to the investigation of the input is that the function of proposed processes may be redundant, and therefore unnecessary. What is worse, the processes may be inapplicable to much of the ordinary

phenomena of social perception. Further, as complications arise in the ordinary operation of proposed processes, the theorist is forced to postulate increasingly more complicated cognitive processes to explain how perception is even possible (Neisser, 1977).

A second set of problems involves the role of stimulation in the construction of the research settings in which we study social perception. The absence of empirical knowledge of what is available to be processed increases the danger of creating stimulus conditions which are consistent with proposed processes and which yield the types of outcomes predicted on the basis of the models but which bear little resemblance to ordinary conditions in the perceptual environment. In such research settings, we run the risk that the experimental context could enhance the necessity of proposed processes rather than assess their adequacy as components of general models of social perception.

These points are well illustrated in recent issues emerging in the social perception literature. For example, there is a growing recognition that presently proposed processes are too reflective, too linguistically based, and too slow to account for much of the basic phenomena of social perception such as immediate impressions of people and causality and direct emotional and affective reactions (Ginsburg, 1976; Lowe & Kassin, 1980; Zajonc, 1980; Zillman, 1978). Some investigators have raised serious doubts about the inevitable necessity of such intervening processes in the everyday context of social perception (e.g., Langer, 1978; Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978; Neisser, 1980; Zillman, 1978).

Unfortunately, currently espoused processes are not amenable to changes which transform them to high-speed, automatic processes. A change from reflection to preconscious processing will require an adequate treatment of how such processing works. Further, the necessary amount of preconscious processing

will be considerable, compromising the elegance and testability of present models (Rogers, 1980). Also, the proposal of preconscious processing and non-linguistic modifications either will require an additional step in already cumbersome models to translate such processing into consciousness and into linguistic form or will require radically changing the entire process into preconscious, nonlinguistic form. The latter would be less of a solution than a convenience at this point. Finally, there are problems regarding the wisdom of transforming already questionable processes. The role played in perception by the widely debated schema notion (cf., Fiske & Linville, 1980), for example, is particularly problematic. Under the normal complexity of stimulation in the social environment, more and finer distinctions are called for and more schemata are necessary. The problem of selecting, from among the many internal representations applicable, the schema to be activated and the meaning to be imposed requires some foreknowledge of the meaning of the input. Yet this is the very function of schemata in perception, creating what Baron (1980) refers to as a "pernicious" form of circularity.

The very necessity of proposed processes, as noted above, rests upon the information potential of stimulation under ordinary circumstances. In addition to providing little direct evidence on the inadequacy of ordinary stimulation to specify social percepts, the current research literature is of very limited usefulness as a source of indirect evidence. Recent criticisms have been leveled at the extent to which the conditions ordinarily investigated in the lab are representative of the conditions ordinarily encountered by people in their interactions with the environment (see Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1980, v.6, no. 4). Under the assumption that some form of higher level processing must mediate the relationship between the stimulation obtained and percepts and that this processing is of a linguistic nature, investigators

generally provide research participants with "pre-processed" stimuli such as adjective checklists and other linguistically based procedures, such as written descriptions of social events designed to vary person and event categories. In essence, traditional procedures circumvent the stimulation selected by individuals in first-hand observation and treat observed characteristics and behavior as equivalent to trait lists and verbal descriptions written by experimenters.

As noted above, assessment problems are created by substituting process-consistent stimulus contexts for the ordinary sources of information obtained from the observation of people and their behavior. Early demonstrations in the perception literature relied on the construction of ambiguous stimulus contexts to illustrate the inadequacy of stimulation to specify the environment to perception and, therefore, the necessity of intervening processes. Knowles and Smith (1982) note the ambiguity created by pre-selected lists of conflicting adjective cues and verbal accounts of social events which set at odds the influence of situational and personal factors. They suggest that cognitive processing is a built-in feature of much work in social perception. This is a conclusion that others have reached as well (cf., Baron, 1980; Baron & Harvey, 1980; Lowe & Kassin, 1980; Weary, Swanson, Harvey, & Yarkin, 1980). There are some examples of social perception research in which alternative procedures have allowed for the use of behavioral stimuli. A good example is provided by the research on the attribution of emotion which has employed limited use of behavioral stimuli. However, the general procedures still create ambiguities and provide solutions for the subjects. Under these circumstances, the individual is almost coerced into thinking about the events (Leventhal, 1974; Zillman, 1978).

Reconsidering the Information Potential of Stimulation

The key to understanding the difficulties encountered by the traditional approach to social perception lies in the assumptions one makes about the sources of perceptual meaning available to the individual. The assumption is made implicitly or explicitly that the structuring necessary to specify aspects of the environment to our impressions of them lies strictly within the head of the perceiver. The notions that perceptual meaning must be imposed upon incoming stimulation and that the goal of perceptual investigation is to elucidate this process are entrenched in our thinking about perception, "social" or "physical." Such assumptions deserve reconsideration. The strict adherence to a position that restricts the sources of perceptual meaning to those within the observer's head ignores the fact that people are immersed in an environment of objects, surfaces, other people, and their behavior and artifacts. It ignores the stability in the environment which can serve as a source of perceptual meaning to the individual.

Rather than treating the nature of stimulation in the social perception process as a foregone conclusion, it seems clear that the information available to social perception is as much a problem for theory and research as are the mechanisms of social perception. The effectiveness of a shift in strategy from proposing internal processes to investigating the information potential of stimulation can be seen in recent developments in the perception literature. This literature is particularly relevant to a discussion of social perception given the historical parallels between the two literatures. Indeed, the conception of social stimulation as fragmentary cues and clues resembles the "sensory mosaic" conception of a punctate, momentary, and meaningless retinal stimulus proposed by Berkeley, Hume, and later von Helmholtz, and the more recent interest in the static retinal image. Under both the sensory mosaic and iconic

conceptions, stimulation is considered indeterminate in specifying percepts. Early demonstrations involving equivalent configurations (cf., Haber & Hershen-son, 1973) and perceptual constancy attempted to establish stimulation as an ambiguous or synonymous mediator of the environment to perception. Consequent conceptions of the perceptual process in both literatures are likewise similar. Indeed, Heider (1958) used Brunswik's (1934) constructionist model of perception in the conceptual framework he established for social perception. The two phase process proposed above for social perception models are analogous to Brunswik's translation/coding and constructive phases whereby the perceiver imposes order and meaning upon incoming stimulation.

Over the last three decades, the information potential of stimulation has become an important empirical issue among students of perception. Early demonstrations of the inadequacy of stimulation to specify percepts have been carefully reconsidered and found to be inappropriate on a number of grounds (cf., Gibson, 1950; 1960; 1963; 1966; Haber & Hershen-son, 1973; Johansson, 1950; 1958; 1964; Knowles & Smith, 1982). As a result of such critical analyses, current studies are more frequently designed as efforts to discover dynamic correlates in stimulation which combine temporal (successive) order with spatial (adjacent) order to correspond to objects, locations, and events which are the relevant aspects of the environment to be perceived. Such studies are largely the result of Gibson's influence and represent a steady theoretical movement away from traditional conceptions of stimulation toward conceptions which stress the adequacy of stimulation to provide information to perception (cf., Boynton, 1974; Haber, 1978; Johansson, vonHofsten, & Jansson, 1980; Mace, 1977; Shaw & Bransford, 1977; Turvey, 1977).

Parallel conceptions have emerged only recently in social perception. Although there is no corresponding wealth of research on social stimulation

yet, there are some promising leads. In the event perception literature (cf., Johansson, vonHofsten, & Jansson, 1980), for example, considerable interest has been focused on high order, invariant patterns which emerge in human movement and specify certain properties of human action. In social perception, the work of Newton, Engquist, & Bois (1978) similarly illustrates a basis for action perception in patterns of movement. In other areas of social psychology such as nonverbal communication, ethnomethodology, and ethogenics, considerable effort has been directed toward critical description of patterns which emerge in complex human interaction behavior. Structural analyses have ranged from micromomentary movement and paralinguistic behavior to the structure of actions within situated episodes of behavior. Although little consideration is given to the implications of such structure for perception in these latter literatures, they are directly relevant to our understanding of social perception and are conspicuously absent from our discussions of social perception.

Clearly it seems that the time has come for a shift in the focus of investigation from the internal processes of social perception to the structure preserved in stimulation. Such a shift is not a complete dismissal of any and all forms of internal processing from consideration. Rather, it is the recognition of the human being as an efficient and effective perceiver. When intervening processes are proposed, they should conform to the nature and the characteristics of the information available for social perception. The traditional, reverse approach is biologically unsound and, as we have tried to illustrate, practically unwise. After considering the information potential of social stimulation, it may be the case that the applicability of current models will rest upon the nature of the event observed and the responses required of the observer. For example, is the event enigmatic in terms of being novel in structure or of occurring under less than ordinary circumstances (cf., Langer,

1978)? Is the individual required to perceive and respond to a person or event or is he or she asked to explain, recall, or account for an event (cf., Ginsburg, 1976)?

Further, it should be noted that a shift in emphasis from internal processing to the information potential of social stimulation is not an attempt to remove the perceiver from the social perception process. An initial attraction of cognitive models as opposed to "stimulus-response" formulations is the assumption that the individual's imposition of perceptual meaning on stimulation gives the perceiver an active role in generating an understanding of the world of objects, events, people, and other animals. Knowles and Smith (1982) suggest however that the usual distinction made between the current cognitive approach and S-R approaches is based on the confusion of active agency with the processing of input data much like a computer. Borrowing their conception of the role of the perceiver from current perspectives in perception, they stress the perceiver's active search of available stimulation for information relevant to his or her states or responses. Although the applicability of such a conception will rest upon the investigation of the information preserved in stimulation, it is as easily amenable to the influence of motivational and affective factors as is the otherwise cold, rational information processing perspective.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the shift in focus of investigation proposed here is the function it would serve in moderating our current, somewhat unrestrained, enthusiasm for high level cognitive solutions to how it is that people understand and operate in their social environment. Perhaps, as Langer (1978) argues, our initial enthusiasm has led social psychology in general, and social perception in particular, to become too cognitive, too psychological, and not very social. As social psychologists, we should entertain the possibility that our interests have been overly swayed in the direction

of the reciprocal relationships between "people and their computers" (Shotter & Newson, 1980) at the expense of understanding the relationship between people and their environment. At least it seems clear that a comprehensive understanding of the social perception process must include the information available to social perception.

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